

Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark up the text with questions and/or comments.
3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

Obsessed with Children

Source: *The Week*/ December 2, 2011

The sexual-abuse scandal at Penn State has raised awareness of pedophilia. How do these predators operate?

What is a pedophile?

It's an adult with a sexual preference for prepubescent children (typically 13 or under) of either sex, though some prefer one gender. The term can be used to describe anyone who fantasizes about, is sexually aroused by, or experiences urges toward children, whether or not they act on them. Most psychologists believe that people with pedophilia will eventually act on it in some way — by exposing themselves to, spying on, or sexually touching children. About 4 percent of the population is believed to have pedophilic urges. Psychologists now categorize it as a sexual orientation much like heterosexuality and homosexuality, in the sense that the sexual attraction to children appears to be involuntary and remains stable over time. Pedophilia is also treated as a disorder, of course, because pedophiles who act on their urges cause grievous harm to young children, leaving them with emotional scars that can last for decades.

What kind of people are pedophiles?

Most are male, though about 6 percent are female. Although the stereotype of the pedophile is the trench-coated loner who hangs around playgrounds, in reality most pedophiles function as ordinary members of the community, like former Penn State defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky, the man accused of sexually abusing children in his care. About 44 percent of convicted pedophiles either are or have been married, and a vast majority of pedophiles have sexual relationships with adults — only 7 percent say they are exclusively attracted to children. The majority of child molesters do not abuse children at random. For all the worries about "stranger danger," 70 percent of reported abuses involve an offender who knows the child, including relatives.

What goes through their heads?

Most pedophiles are driven by strong feelings of love and tenderness toward children, say psychologists, rather than a desire to hurt them. They romanticize children, seek out their company, and convince themselves that their feelings are mutual. "It's not just sex, it's romance," said psychologist Dr. Leslie Lothstein. "They're in love with the 5-year-old." Many take voluntary positions or jobs that allow them to be close to children, such as Scout leader, coach, or priest. Pedophiles usually select targets carefully, and "groom" them over a period of months with gifts, attention, and special trips. Only then, after gaining the child's trust, do they initiate sexual contact. Pedophiles often feel guilt and shame about their activities, say therapists. "People don't grow up and say, 'I want to be a pedophile,'" said the Rev. Stephen Rossetti, who runs a psychiatric hospital near Washington, D.C. "All the people I've ever talked to hate it."

What causes pedophilia?

It's not clear. It's commonly thought that those who were sexually abused as children are at high risk of becoming pedophiles, but only one third of pedophiles admit to having been abused. Other kinds of emotional trauma in childhood, research suggests, may also lead a person to get "stuck" in an early stage of emotional development. Researchers who've studied pedophiles' brains have found abnormalities that cause low impulse control and obsessive behavior. But the cause remains something of a mystery, just like much of human sexuality.

What happens when pedophiles are convicted?

The average jail sentence handed down to a convicted pedophile is 11 years, but several states go beyond simple jail terms. Florida, Louisiana, and California now allow or mandate "chemical castration" for sex offenders — drugs that suppress testosterone and quash sexual appetite. Texas even allows a judge to recommend surgical castration, if the offender gives consent. But the punishment doesn't end with the sentence. All 50 states have reporting laws requiring sex offenders to register with local authorities, so that their whereabouts can be monitored. Megan's Law, a federal mandate named after a 7-year-old girl who was raped and murdered in 1994, requires that a community be notified if a sex offender lives there. Though the law remains controversial, reporting requirements seem to have helped. In a recent 15-year period, sex crimes against children declined by 53 percent.

Can pedophilia be cured?

No. There's no magic cure that can make the sexual attraction to children go away, and up to 50 percent of convicted pedophiles re-offend. But like drug addiction, gambling addiction, and other destructive obsessions, pedophilia can be successfully treated, if pedophiles are motivated to stop their behavior. The most common treatment for pedophiles is "relapse prevention," a lifelong therapy similar to alcoholism treatment that conditions them to live with their obsession but not act on it. Some clinics offer aversive conditioning, or "shame therapy," which forces pedophiles to associate their urges with something painful or unpleasant, such as an electric shock. There are also drugs that can suppress a pedophile's sex drive. With the right combination of drugs and therapy, pedophiles can learn to resist their urges, said Dr. Fred Berlin, founder of the Johns Hopkins Sexual Disorders Clinic. "We're not going to be able to put out the fire," he said, "but we can do a nice job of containing [it]."

The dangers of the Internet

The Internet has given sexual predators a new way of finding victims, but most of these predators are not technically pedophiles. About 99 percent of the sex crimes committed through Internet-initiated contacts involve the statutory rape of teenagers, rather than little children. Pedophiles, who by definition prefer children who have not reached puberty, rarely meet victims online. But the Internet does give them a forum to communicate with one another. European and U.S. police recently busted 70,000 members of an online message board where pedophiles exchanged child pornography and stories of abuse, along with justifications for their behavior. This kind of community "allows [pedophiles] to avoid admitting that their desires are harmful and illegal," said former police commander and anti-pedophile campaigner Bill Walsh. "That can allow them to take that final step and cross over from fantasy into real-world offenses."

Reflection ideas:

- What steps can you take to protect yourself from Internet predators?
- Do you support "chemical castration" as a form of treatment? Why? Why not?
- Research and share your thoughts about Megan's Law.

Orange County Child Abuse Registry (714) 940-1000 (24 hours)

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